

BIRD HEAD EFFIGY PIPES WERE IMPORTANT PREHISTORIC TALISMANS

by
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Birds were omnipresent occupants of the prehistoric sky world. Early chroniclers of Historic period Indian communities recorded that native populations believed birds were air-born emissaries of powerful spirits in the sky world. Various pleadings could be ritually transmitted to upper world forces through these winged messengers. It was felt upper world spiritual forces controlled the environment of earthbound inhabitants and virtually controlled their destiny. Some of the sky world forces were thought to be ancestor spirits who were entitled to influence the current residents' lives. As a result, the birds that had access to this upper world and to a certain extent their modeled representations, received homage. This was usually accomplished during special ceremonies such as ritual pipe smoking events. The proliferation of bird symbolism in various spiritual activities became part of an overriding expression of religious beliefs that exploded during the Late Prehistoric Period in mostly aggregated Fort Ancient and Mississippian communities. Symbolic bird references were expressed in a number of ways including on prominent rock carvings such as Ohio's Saxon petroglyph (Figure 1).

The writer has long been interested in the effigy expressions of prehistoric craftsmen, especially figural examples that may have been documented in use into the Historic Period such as bird effigy pipes. Many of the bird pipes were crafted in standardized designs absent the necessary details to determine the species. Little research has been published about the significance of the bird pipes or their probable uses in late prehistoric communities. In addition their identities especially in the case of the smaller bird head pipes, are rarely addressed in published materials.

The bird head carvings in the round are among the most interesting effigy sculptures. The Fort Ancient culture bird head depictions in widely scattered numbers appear on pipes from southeastern Ohio and neighboring West Virginia. Additional examples are found in the Scioto River watershed region in Ross and Scioto Counties in Ohio, extending into northern Kentucky. These pipes, the products of both prehistoric and proto-historic people (circa AD1000 to 1650), were a widely dispersed and long lasting cultural motif.

Bird head pipes because of their typically small proportions were probably crafted mostly for specialized uses. Their small bowl capacities and delicate nature would

suggest they were individually smoked. They may also have been viewed as important keepsake items, charms (symbolic totems). Their sometimes colorful but fragile materials would have affected their durability if they were used indiscriminately. Most were probably the personal property of either their artisan makers or leaders of families/clans.

An intriguing and yet perplexing issue is the identity of the bird species depicted on the pipes. A few examples of bird head pipes such as figural owls depictions are readily identifiable but as stated most other examples lack distinguishing features (see Figure 2). Were the bird sculptures intended to be merely representational portrayals? Perhaps only a rudimentary bird reference was the accepted mantra. The mostly copycat carvings may have been left intentionally vague to demonstrate respect for the full spectrum of birds with potential access to the upper spirit world. Some of the pipes may reflect the limitations of the artists' abilities.

The writer suggests that at least some of the bird head sculptures were intended to be specific bird species. Some in fact appear to resemble carrion eaters, such as crows, and/or vultures. Crows and vultures would have been logical icons used in a symbolic manner used during ritual events. It could have been believed their behavioral tendencies made them powerful messengers and helped them gain access to upper world spirits. They were also chosen as symbolic models for pipes crafted by other ritual based cultural groups. Figure 3 shows a Hopewell platform pipe featuring a crow effigy. It was found at the Tremper Site in Scioto County, Ohio. The flesh eating crows and vultures not only demonstrated aggressive foraging behaviors, by consuming considerable amounts of decaying animal flesh, but they also intimidated and tended to dominate other bird species. Native populations probably recognized their unique qualities during ritual events. Dedicated smoking activities with symbolic crows and vultures as upper world interveners was probably believed to provide the best access to certain powerful spiritual influences. In the superstitious and often unpredictable world of prehistoric man it would have been prudent to utilize these influential alliances in their earthly pursuits.

Figure 4 (center) shows a carrion eater in an imposing looking portrayal. The bird head pipe in the middle is a large Mississippian specimen from Hickman County, Kentucky. The contemporaneous Missis-

sippian people, who were closely related to the Fort Ancient people, produced this example. The Mississippians revered their vertebrate bird neighbors and were fond of carving vulture and crow head pipes, some in considerable detail. The pictured pipe is a vulture.

While the writer's thoughts about the identities and possible ritual uses for bird head pipes are based on Historic Period ritual practices it also should be suggested that some specimens probably experienced more mundane lives. Personal pipe smoking became a regular secular event in many Fort Ancient communities. Some of the bird effigy pipes therefore may have been merely whimsically carved examples that were primarily used for personal pleasure. It might have been a matter of refined personal taste, social condition or even competitive advantage to craft and utilize these eye-catching effigy pipes.

Figures 2 and 4 show arrays of pipes. The Figure 2 examples were all crafted using exotic showy materials including chlorite and pipestone in many colorful variations. Most are very small ranging from 1 1/2" in height to 2". The largest specimen is 3 1/4" in height. All of the pictured pipes were found in southern Ohio, except the orange colored pipestone example with the under cut jaw, from Mason County, Kentucky. The pipe at the top of the photo, from Ross County, Ohio, was crafted using brilliant emerald green chlorite. The use of exotic raw materials for pipe manufacturing such as chlorite was an infrequent occurrence among Fort Ancient groups. Figure 4 shows additional bird head pipes, made of sandstone, a more typical raw material, including the previously referenced large Mississippian vulture pipe. The latter pipe has shell eye inserts and measures 5" by 2". The smaller pipes (1 1/2" to 2" in height) are from Ohio Fort Ancient sites.



Figure 1 (Gehlbach)
Bird petroglyph in
a granite boulder
from Saxon Ohio
(Ohio Historical
Society collection).



Figure 2 (Gehlbach) Bird head effigy pipes from southern Ohio and Kentucky, chlorite and pipestone.

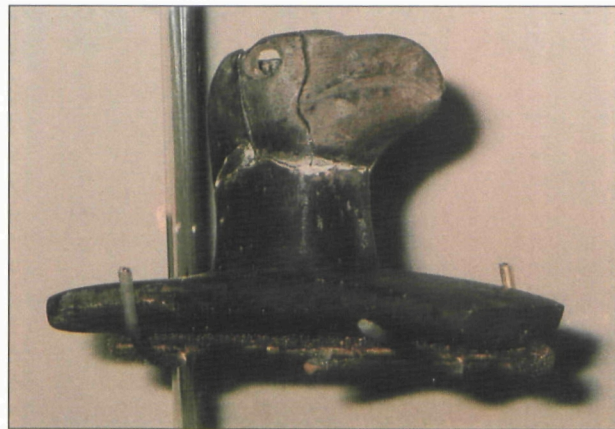


Figure 3 (Gehlbach) Crow head effigy platform pipe from the Tremper Mound, Scioto County, Ohio, pipestone (Ohio Historical Society collection)

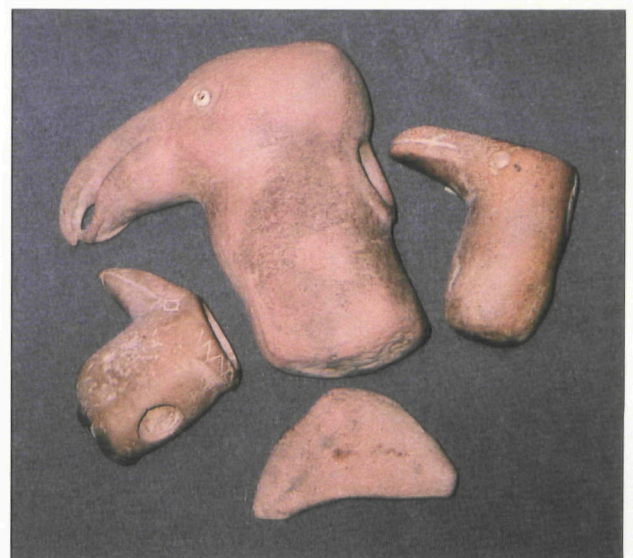


Figure 4 (Gehlbach) Bird head effigy pipes mostly from Ohio. The large pipe from Hickman County, Kentucky, sandstone